

Collages and Poetry and a Play: An Arts-Based Research Journey

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Artmaking by its very nature is a creative process through which a researcher can examine and clarify multiple relationships, patterns, and meanings during the research process. I offer and describe four examples of arts-based research methods from my research study investigating how students and teachers in alternative high schools characterize art education to illustrate this process: (1) collage as an organizing metaphor; (2) poetry as data gathering/data analysis, (3) “bead collage” as an in-depth interview method; and (4) a play to report research findings. The data collected in this study included visual field notes, textual (word) field notes, interview transcripts, play, artwork, and poems.

COLLAGE AS AN ORGANIZING METAPHOR

Before selecting my research sites, I visited four art teachers in four different alternative educational environments. Throughout that day I kept encountering “torn” paper everywhere (torn newspaper, napkins, paper towels, students making torn paper self-portraits), so I created a visual field note of my experiences (Figure 1) and wrote about “torn” representing the students in these sites. *Torn* became an organizing metaphor for my thinking and the title of the play describing my findings.

POETRY AS DATA GATHERING/DATA ANALYSIS

Researchers can reflect on visual art using poetry as well. Poems *TORN 1* and *TORN 2* were written as a data-gathering strategy after creating art about a site visit (Figures 2 & 3). After, and sometimes during, field visits I created artwork about my observations and my responses to what I experienced. I created 12 x 18-inch drawings and collages that I cut it into 4 x 6-inch cards and wrote field notes on the backs of these cards. Other times I



FIGURE 1. *Torn*, visual field note.

TORN 1

*ripped, a (part)
torn to pieces
not whole not complete
torn
in parts
torn between two things*

FIGURE 2. *TORN 1*, a poem written while reflecting on visual art created after a site visit.

created poems in response to my reflective artwork as a method to understand the data.

I returned to *TORN 1* during the data analysis phase and wrote a third poem, *TORN 3* (Figure 4) because writing poetry helps make sense of data in a non-discursive manner (Kay, 2008; Leavy, 2009; Richardson, 1992). In poetic form I played with the words/metaphors associated with the words *torn* and *form* and in the collage process, which I used in my visual memos, I reflected on how something torn can be made whole. I discovered that I needed to move from *torn* to *whole*, much like the art teachers in my study were moving their students beyond *torn* to something holistic.

Using metaphors of the word *torn* helped clarify the essential questions in this research study: What teaching and learning occur in art education classrooms with adolescent students at-risk in alternative high schools? What is the art teacher's role in this type of setting? What are the goals of the art teacher? What are the goals of the students?

TORN 2

*troubled,
in trouble,
traumatized,
the 'other',
the outsider,
relationships,
normal?*

FIGURE 3. *TORN 2*, a poem written while reflecting on visual art created after a site visit.

FROM T.O.R.N. TO TRANS FORM

*ripped,
a (part)
torn to pieces
not whole
torn
not complete
torn
in parts
torn between two things
to take shape
to form
in[form]
de[form]
re[form]
con[form]
[form]ation
[form]ative
[form]fiting
[form]ulating
per[form]
trans[form]
art education
transformation*

FIGURE 4. *TORN 3*, a poem written during data analysis.



FIGURE 5. Bead collage created by an interview participant.

"BEAD COLLAGE" AS AN IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW METHOD

As a part of the interview process, I asked my participants to select beads to facilitate the construction of knowledge and reflection of meaning. The art teachers selected a bead, held it, reflected on their students, their teaching philosophy, and/or the research experience and as they related their personal stories, the construction of knowledge continued. Each participant chose and arranged beads into a three-dimensional metaphorical representation of her experience and talked about her bead selections and their application to her pedagogy and practice. This bead process helped the art teachers articulate their thoughts and ideas in a tactile way Kay, 2013. Interview transcripts and photographs of finished bead collages (Figure 5) served as a method of data collection.

A PLAY TO REPORT RESEARCH FINDINGS

As students changed classes and their art teachers prepared for their next class, I visualized actors quickly moving props and sets and assuming stage positions and decided to write my findings in narrative form as a play (Figure 6). This dramatic format like ethnodrama, which presents research findings as a dramatic script (Leavy, 2009), represented the participants' stories naturalistically and realistically, using their multiple voices and words. The inclusion of the narrator/researcher's voice offers both description and interpretation of the data like the play *Our Town*, in which the narrator's voice is ever-present.

CONCLUSION

When making art, the artist/researcher searches, looks, examines, explores, organizes, arranges, sorts, and connects with the data as an ongoing form of inquiry. In this arts-based research process, artist/researchers can construct alternative readings of the data that shift beyond descriptions and realistic details to include visual images. As non-linear language, visual images, poetry, and dramatic narratives record and document observations, experiences, and responses to the research data in a concrete way that text alone does not. ■

ACT I

(It's warm outside and it's extremely warm in the art education classroom at Kozol. The heat is on in the building; the sun is generating more heat through the large windows. Examples of student artwork hang on the walls. A bulletin/chalk board displays daily announcements and class/school information. Quotes that read "Artists create the world they imagine" and "An artist is a person who uses imagination and skill to communicate ideas in a visual form" frame the teacher's desk.)

NARRATOR: *Students enter the multi-grade/multi-level art classroom – some with MP3 players and headphones in place, tired and sleepy, most wearing huge, invisible backpacks – filled with their emotions, hardships, struggles, and their troubles. They may self-identify as losers, quitters, and/or addicts. There is minimal difference between students here and in other regular traditional schools. There is an art studio atmosphere in the class. Art supplies, for students' use, are organized in drawers, on open shelves, and in cabinets or storage closets. Students are simultaneously working at multiple levels on various assignments with different media. The teacher moves from student to student checking on their progress, demonstrating lesson(s), offering technical assistance, encouragement and/or support.*

SCENE 1: BEGINNING

LOUISE: *All right class, let's get started. Sign in and take your seats. Who's not here today? Who's finished with their projects and who needs my help?*

BEN: *I've been told I was artistically challenged.*

LOUISE: *By whom?*

BEN: *Everybody—my parents, my teachers, my friends.*

ADAM: *I'm an art hater!*

LOUISE: *Hater? That's really a strong statement.*

FIGURE 6. Excerpt from the play, *T...O...R...N...* (Kay, 2008, p. 84; Kay, 2010).

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